

Could you briefly introduce yourself? Your name, date of birth and where you grew up.

My maiden name is Recken and I was born on 15/07/1939 in Clervaux. I was the second of four children.

And your forename?

My forename is Marie-Antoinette. I'm known as Manni.

Could you also briefly introduce your parents? Their name and occupation.

My father's name was Joseph Recken, and he was a blacksmith. At that time he worked at the Schmit garage. My mother was a housewife and had a small grocer's shop next to the Hotel du Commerce. This hotel was an important hub during those times.

Could you also briefly introduce your siblings?

My sister Els, Elisabeth, is one year older than me. Georges is 2 years younger than me. The youngest, Gibbes, came into the world much later.

Who played an important role in your everyday life when you were a child?

At that time it was my grandfather. He was over 80 years old and a very level-headed, peaceful person who was simply present. He never interfered. He went for walks with us a lot and always sang songs. It was nice with him. He was there for us.

How old were you when the German Wehrmacht invaded in 1940?

I was one year old then.

What changed in your family's everyday life as a result of the German occupation?

You had to pay attention and were not allowed to say anything. We children also had to keep quiet. We were not allowed to say anything, no names of other people. Our parents explained to us that our father did not agree with the Germans and was therefore working against them. We knew that. That's why we were very careful. We were also told time and again to be careful. Next door at the Hotel du Commerce, all the Gestapo people were housed. At the same time, young men who should have gone to war were hidden there. They were picked up by the Luxembourg Resistance and hidden somewhere. The Hotel du Commerce was often the first place from where they were then taken to another location. They often had to change their hiding place because they had not presented themselves for military service and were therefore being searched for. That was one of my father's main tasks. He had to pick them up, keep them there for a few days and then try to get them across the Belgian border. In Clervaux there was a whole group that took care of that. Everything had to be done in secret. The various hiding places on the way had to be kept absolutely secret. The whole thing was a network. If there would have been a leak, all the others would have been at risk. We realised that very early on. We sensed it. Not in such a way that I could have explained it as I do now, but I sensed that my father was against the occupying power, against the Nazis, and that this was dangerous and no one was allowed to know anything about it. My father belonged to this circle, and that led to tensions at home, because, after all, he had three small children. And my mother had the shop and her old father, and a husband who was never around. During the day he worked in the garage, and in the evening, he took care of the hidden men at the Hotel du Commerce. He fed them and made sure they were satisfied. Often, they were not happy,

because they were terrified of being discovered. This also led to tensions that had to be resolved. Later I learned that it was often critical because there were Germans next door.

How did that work out in practice when the men had to be brought down from the attic into the car and then driven to the border?

That was always a very critical moment. They used secret corridors. There used to be staff corridors. They used them to get downstairs, where a taxi was waiting to take them to the border in its boot.

Can you say who was in this resistance group apart from your father?

Yes. Besides my father, there was a Mr Schmit who was always at the wheel of the taxi. His brother had a garage and was also part of the group. Then there was the owner of the hotel where it all took place and his wife. She was also in on it and a very strong resistance fighter. Those were the ones on the spot. Others picked the men up or the latter were brought to them. A gentleman from Troine and the vet. They led them across the Belgian border. Everything that took place at that time was dangerous. The Germans had an incredible amount of information. They had a lot of spies there. People from the area. The Germans knew a lot, but didn't always intervene, that's what my parents told me later.

What did your mother know about your father's activities?

She did not know everything and did not want to know everything. She was, of course, terribly afraid. She was afraid of the Germans and what might happen. My father was always away. During the day he was in the workshop, and in the evening he went to the hotel to check on the men and plan the next actions. So he wasn't at home, and my mother got annoyed. "You're never there, leaving me alone with the children and my father."

So she didn't help take care of the men?

I don't remember that. I am convinced that she knew more than she admitted. After all, it's not possible that under her eyes her husband was away every night, next door the hotel with the hidden men and her not knowing what was going on. But she said nothing. She went on with her life and she did good. She was responsible for three small children. She had to take care of her old father. That was fine. The other thing was my father's business.

Why was it so dangerous to hide the men in the Hotel du Commerce?

All the Nazis who were there were housed there. They had rooms there. The police station in Clervaux was occupied by Germans. They also had families. And these families lived partly on the upper floor of the police station, but also partly in the Hotel du Commerce. It was a very dangerous situation. It is normal that they were caught one after the other and sent to the concentration camp.

Can you describe what happened?

The pressure on the Germans, who had perhaps closed their eyes for a while and let things happen, increased. They were all taken prisoner, my father too, and then taken to the capital.

Can you remember the day they picked up your father?

My mother had always warned him. One day they would come. Eventually they did come. There was a terrible commotion in the house. They were shouting around, it was early in the morning. They always picked people up very early in the morning, when they were still half asleep. It was easiest that way. During the day, people might have been prepared. Those who did the work never slept much. Someone banged on our door and shouted, "Open up, State police!" My mother opened the door and my father hastily got dressed. Even if he had tried to escape, they would have caught him. The house was surrounded. So he went with them and was put in a cell. We children then brought him food every day while he was still there. But we never saw him. Later we wondered whether he got the food at all. After all, the Germans were hungry too. But in the end it wasn't that important. We brought him the food until they said he was no longer there. From Clervaux he came to the Villa Pauly. It was notorious. The Nazi interrogations took place there. The Luxembourgers who had been arrested came to the Villa Pauly where they were interrogated. And that was hard. He was beaten and injured. They tried to squeeze him out so that he would betray his friends and the hiding places. But he did not. The others in his group had been arrested along with him. So someone must have betrayed them. I was often asked later what happened to this traitor. But I do not know. I only know that the children of the man who was thought to have betrayed them went to school with my brothers after the war. It was decided that the whole thing should not be followed up.

Your mother was also summoned to the Villa Pauly.

Yes, so she was alone with us and had a huge rage against the Germans, but also against our father for putting us through all this. She also had to appear at the Villa Pauly. That was terrible for us children. Our father had to experience hell there, and now our mother was supposed to go there too. She was away for a few days because she had to go to the capital and stay with relatives there. We picked her up later at the station, hoping that she would return for good. We immediately asked her how it had been. She was put under pressure because they wanted information from her. But she had none. And that was her good fortune. They then left her alone and she was allowed to go home.

Had she seen your father?

Yes. She was confronted with him. It was terrible, because he looked terrible. He was very skinny, like someone who had been tortured. She came home and was distraught. She wondered why it had to come to this. And she had a huge rage against the Germans.

Your father was imprisoned in various places? In Hinzert, among other places. Do you know how he fared there?

Like all the prisoners there. When they arrived, they were treated very hard to get as much out of them as possible. So that they would tell everything. But then that stopped at some point. After that they were just prisoners who had to work. They didn't get much to eat and had no suitable clothes. So again and again some of them got sick and died.

Did you hear anything from your father at home at that time?

Yes, but I can't remember how many times. Once, though, for sure. He had asked my mother to send him a parcel with food and clothes. She did. We had little at that time, but she asked everywhere for things that she could then send to my father. My father knew that the parcel was on its way and had arrived, but he got almost nothing.

How were things at home at that time?

My mother was alone with us. She was also terribly angry. When the German mothers - the occupying forces were there at the time - came to our shop, my mother showed them what she thought of them. That was very dangerous. She was also warned. By the Nazis themselves. She would have to change her behaviour or she would also be punished. So she held her tongue.

Was there also a danger that you would be relocated?

Yes. She was constantly threatened. And we also started to pack our bags in case we were relocated. They stood there for a very long time. The most necessary things for each of us. Fortunately, it didn't come to that.

You have talked a lot about your father's resistance. Did you also learn about collaboration as a child?

Luxembourgers who stood by the Germans? Yes. There was talk about it. But very guardedly. Names were mentioned that have always remained in my memory. But most of them were not punished. Only those who really collaborated with the enemy. But after a while they were back again. But that was a good thing. Peace and quiet had to return.

So you already knew as a small child who was with the Germans and who wasn't?

Yes. We knew that, but we were always told not to say anything. That stuck in our minds. And that's what we did.

How did you experience the liberation in September 1944?

I have no memories of it. I don't know. I cannot comment on that.

How did you experience the Battle of the Bulge, which was very bad in Clervaux?

There was a lot of shooting. My father was no longer there, he was in Hinzert. My mother was alone with us and her father. There was more and more shooting. At some point we were told we had to go into the cellar. We could no longer stay in the open houses. So we all went to a cellar in a big house. Many people from Clervaux were already there. The last to come was my grandfather. He was diffident and let the others go first. I think we were only there for a day and a night. The next day, my uncle, who looked after us a bit in my father's absence, picked up my brother and me and took us with him. Outside we had to run, ducking down, to my uncle's cellar at the station. He then went to fetch my sister and grandfather. He brought them to us in the cellar in the same way.

So he put his life in danger.

Absolutely. I always respected my uncle for that and was very grateful to him. His cellar was concreted over and many people from the neighbourhood had found refuge there. That's when we came along. My grandfather had a patriarchal presence. He brought calm to the whole thing. He prayed constantly and encouraged us to pray too. The worse the sounds of war were from outside, the more we prayed and kept quiet.

You also had American soldiers with you for a while? That must have been dangerous too.

Yes. They were also accommodated there, but could not stay. They were a danger to themselves and to us. At some point they left and looked for another place.

With that, the danger was over for you?

That danger, certainly. But we were constantly in danger. There was constant shooting and we knew that something could happen at any time. But in this bunker that we actually had there, we felt quite safe. My uncle and aunt made sure that there was peace there.

How did you experience the moment of liberation after the Battle of the Bulge?

At some point we were told we were free. For us, that meant we could go back home. But that was not so easy. A lot of things were destroyed. We went home with my uncle, who was always there for us, to see what was left of our home. There was not much left. A lot had been looted too. When the Germans left, we were assigned a house to live in. During the occupation, the German mothers had lived there. My mother wanted to open a grocer's shop again. And that was made possible for her. She was assigned a truck by the reconstruction authorities, which she then drove to Wiltz to the wholesaler to get things for her shop. So we were able to provide for ourselves again. Help came from all sides. Also from our family in the neighbouring villages. They supplied us with food.

How would you describe your home town after the war? What did it look like?

Everything was destroyed. The bridges were broken. The railway bridges. Temporary stairways were built to get down into the village and up again on the other side. In this way, with a lot of provisional measures, they tried to fix everything up so that contact with each other was possible again. So that people could visit each other.

When did your father come home again?

That was the big question. We organised our life, but father was missing. We knew that those who were in the concentration camps would come back home. And that was the case. Those who were still alive came home. When we were told that my father was among them, we children walked to the station with our grandfather to wait for him. That was very moving. But we didn't recognise him. We were told that this was our father, but he was completely changed. He had fluid retention all over his body and was bloated. But the Red Cross was there. They took care of him. He was brought home in a big cluster of people. There was a lot of solidarity, but my father wasn't the only one. There were other people from Clervaux who were also brought home.

You talk about a great solidarity among people.

Yes, that's true. But there was also a lot of help from outside. I can't tell you everything, I don't know everything, because I was a small child. I only know that this help came. Also from Switzerland, that is, from countries that were not occupied. A lot of help came from there. Also for us. There was great joy because of the liberation.

How did you deal with the experiences of the war?

Badly. On the one hand, there was this joy that everything was back to normal. And our father was back and also went back to his job at the garage. Later he helped my mother in the shop, and they did that quite successfully. Outwardly, there was peace. I saw with my parents that

my mother had to be very strong when my father wasn't there. Then when he came back, he wanted to take his place again. That led to many conflicts. It was not nice. You could understand it, but you also wanted peace. They had to come to an agreement, because things had to go on. When the war was over, the Red Cross made an effort so that the children who had suffered from the war could go to Switzerland for a convalescent cure. I went too, but did not enjoy it at all because I was separated from my family. I suffered a lot and was not happy there. I'm sure it did some good, they gave us all kind of support, but it all felt very strange. I missed my home. I was happy when that month was over and I could go home again. But in the end, it also made me stronger and more resilient. And I was able to cope better with school. Even though I was a bad student.

What thoughts do you have when you think back on the war from today's perspective?

Always the hope that something like that won't happen again. I know many of these images that we see today from back then. Actually, I don't want to see them again. On the other hand, I am very grateful that I had such a great family, that the Red Cross took care of us so well. The time in Switzerland was bad for me, but it did me good. I felt better afterwards. I was able to recover and take part in classes again. I was able to put what I had experienced behind me. The most important thing is that despite all the violence and threats, despite all the sacrifices, we experienced so many positive things. Through my family, through the people around us. That made me strong for my future.